

**RETHINKING SEXUAL MORALITY IN 1990S CHINA THROUGH QUEERS IN
*EAST PALACE, WEST PALACE AND FISH AND ELEPHANT***

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ABSTRACT

Exploring how homosexual people are presented in *East Palace, West Palace* and *Fish and Elephant*, this thesis aims to examine how sexual ethics empowers heteronormativity, disciplines sexual subjectivity and gender relationships. Through examining how homosexuals are stigmatized in hygiene and moral discourse and how homosexuals struggle to survive in the heteronormal society and under family pressure, both movies question the orthodoxy and power operation of the heterosexual mechanism.

East Palace, West Palace, the first film discussed in the thesis focuses more on public sphere and state regulation. The discussion first focuses on how the state policed sex in public space in the name of public morality, public order and public health. Through examining the SM relationship description of the two protagonists in this movie, the discussion further extends to the possibility of reversing the hierarchical relationship within the relationship itself. Finally, the “normal” discourse of sexual ethics, which creates feelings of shame for deviant subjects, is challenged in the movie, and the power in naming and shaping the subjects is challenged at the same time.

In *Fish and Elephant*, depicting a special female group, Li Yu tries to expose the gender hierarchy and problems, and show alternatives for women. This movie focuses more on the domestic sphere, especially in the late 1990s, when family and marriage are significantly influenced by the trends of marketization and the new social environment in the reform era. The discussion first focuses on males’ threats to women’s living and working space, and how their gaze would affect the formation of female subjectivity. Second, the discussion moves on to family in the new era and how changes create sexual

morality that confines women. The mother-daughter relationship is crucial in shaping the sexual morality, and lesbianism offers an alternative way to reexamine and jump out of the frame of the dominant sexual morality. The last section explores how deviant sexuality makes compromises with the heterosexual public.

BIOLOGICAL SKETCH

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Introduction

The 1990s was a decade when dramatic changes occurred in Mainland China. Economic reform and marketization started in the 1980s, and flourished in the 1990s. The reform led to drastic growth in the economy, yet meanwhile the drastic transformation in social structure that accompanied economic growth brought about many social problems, including widening the gap between poor and rich, mammonism, a growing unemployment rate, and so forth. At the same time, though the political environment changed in the reform era, the state still had strong control of ideology, and the Tiananmen incident in 1989 again showed the power of the state. In the 1990s, people's activities in the public sphere, especially political activities, media, public gatherings or protests, were under control. Compared to the 1980s, people retreated from the realm of politics and public sphere to the private realm and domestic sphere. They cared more and more about their personal affairs in the domestic sphere, which the state interfered with less, though on the other side of the coin, this involved more self-discipline and moral control. Some scholars defined the new social environment in China as "new totalitarianism."¹ Xu Ben argues that "new totalitarianism derives from the concept "post-totalitarianism," and according to Havel, "post-totalitarianism" is different from totalitarianism in that the threat turns from physical punishments toward people's life styles.² But "new totalitarianism" is different from "post-totalitarianism" as it shows a

¹ Xu Ben, "Zhongguo de 'xin jiquanzhuyi' ji qi moshi jingxiang" 中国的“新极权主义”及其末世景象 (Chinese 'New-totalitarianism' and its dark age). <http://www.usc.cuhk.edu.hk/PaperCollection/Details.aspx?id=4827>. Reprinted from *Dangdai Zhongguo yanjiu* 当代中国研究 (2005 No. 4).

² Václav Havel, and Paul Wilson, "The Power of the Powerless." *International Journal of Politics* 15.3/4 (1985): 23-96.

tendency of returning to original totalitarianism. In the new era, political new totalitarianism oddly collaborates with consumerism, in the sense that it encourages people to focus on their private issues.

In this decade, with the process of marketization and the changes in society, public attention was redirected to domestic issues like personal cultivation and morality, which were also promulgated as the state's concern for people's welfare. In official education as well as "main melody" culture, it was not rare to see themes on personal cultivation, successful people's stories and moral education. New subjects have been cultivated and shaped in this educational and cultural environment in which the morality of the political or public sphere was seldom mentioned, except for patriotism (which was part of moral education).

Sexual morality infiltrated into education and public culture, though sometimes in a subtle way. In China, sexual ethics is linked to traditional Chinese morality, the autocratic political system, and also the market economy in the new era. LGBT, marginal groups that were oppressed and demonized in public culture and education hid in the dark shadows of society. Intriguingly, their stories were picked up by the "marginalized" sixth-generation film directors, and became good materials for rethinking and challenging the official and mainstream discourses. Through examining how homosexual subjects and homoerotic sentiments are oppressed and disciplined by state power, the masses and their family in both films analyzed in this study, I want to discuss how heteronormative discourse and sexual ethics contributed to the new social order and also, how bad subjects like homosexuals reversed normality and provided alternatives. But first, I will explore further the mainstream and official discourse of morality and a "new subjectivity" in

1990s China, choosing the discourse of *suzhi* (education) and popular culture in the 1990s as the examples.

***Suzhi* Discourse and New Cosmopolitan Citizens**

In the 1990s, population quality was a highlighted issue in society and “*suzhi*” became a key term, which closely relates to certain moral norms. The state began to emphasize “*suzhi jiaoyu*” (quality education) at school, people were concerned about cultivating their *suzhi*, and in some contexts, especially in urban society, *suzhi* indicated social status. The discourse of *suzhi* was generated in the overpowering trend of marketization and neoliberalism. Ann Anagnost studied this term and stated that the new appearance of *suzhi* discourse was linked to Chinese people’s desire to become middle-class and cosmopolitan citizens in the new era:

Suzhi’s sense has been extended from a discourse of backwardness and development (the quality of the masses) to encompass the minute social distinctions defining a “person of quality” in practices of consumption and the incitement of a middle-class desire for social mobility.

.....

I argue that *suzhi* is what defines the middle-class family as a theater of neoliberal subject production through the project of building quality into the child.³

Suzhi discourse reflects the widening gap between different social classes and the mindset of a newly formed group which would like to define themselves as the urban middle-class community. Many people talked about *suzhi* because of their desire to be cosmopolitan

³ Ann Anagnost, “The Corporeal Politics of Quality (*Suzhi*),” *Public Culture* 16. 2 (Spring 2004), 189-208.

citizens and middle-class, and such “education” is sometimes more about differentiation of social class, rather than personal cultivation. People such as immigrants from the rural area or some marginalized groups, such as prostitutes, have often been disparaged as people without *suzhi*, since their stereotype is often linked with unsanitary, uneducated and indecent conduct or standards. However, these judgments were all made according to middle-class moral standards and perspectives, and they were in fact strong weapons to protect their identity and social status, which could be guaranteed and gained legitimacy through excluding these “low-quality” people. Luigi Tomba’s study on *suzhi* discourse demonstrates the collaboration between the “emerging middle class” and the state:

Such middle-class, “civilized,” “high-*suzhi*” subjects play their role actively, espousing the late socialist state’s objective of civilizing China’s population and embodying the model of a modern and responsible citizen. As such they challenge the widely held assumption of a normative role played by these groups in the country’s envisaged transition to democracy. Instead, they appear as the most desirable type of subject for an authoritarian state: politically docile, but willing to participate in an ethical and moral community in the name of social stability, consumer rights, and virtues.⁴

In this way the newly emerged class, in the new environment, collaborated with the authoritarian state, and the emphasis on *suzhi* created new morality and hierarchy in the society.

According to Dai Jinhua, it is problematic to suggest that the middle-class, which has appeared a lot in the popular culture and public media, has been the major social class in Chinese society in the 1990s. In her analysis of the cultural phenomena in 1990s China,

⁴ Luigi Tomba, “Of Quality, Harmony, and Community: Civilization and the Middle Class in Urban China.” *Positions*. 17.3 (2009): 591-616.

she reflected on the mass culture and image of “the mass.” She sharply pointed out that the image of middle-class families shown on television was not at all “the real mass” in 1990s China. Rather than truly reflecting the life of “the mass,” popular culture became a platform of cultivating the “future middle-class family.”⁵ The illusion of a large group of middle-class families and the middle-class images flooded society, urging people to behave in a proper and decent manner. This intensified the tension between different social classes as well as the tension between mainstream and the demonized “marginal group.”

Traditional Virtues and Desires in 1990s Melodrama

Popular culture flourished in the 1990s in Mainland China. TV dramas and pop songs, as well as many other forms of popular culture became an important part in people’s leisure life. Among them, TV dramas, especially domestic melodrama, had considerable effects in affecting people’s morality. The first domestic melodrama, *Kewang* (Yearnings), had an unprecedented success in the early 1990s. There was a reason for its tremendous success, for it sheds light on post-socialist humanity and touches people’s memory and everyday life all these years since the Cultural Revolution. While it seems that this drama intended to avoid politics and ideology, it actually to some extent foreshadowed the fresh political and social ideology, for it helped people put the political nightmare behind them and embrace the new subjectivity, the new family in the new era of desire.

⁵ Dai Jinhua, *Yinxing shuxie: 90 niandai Zhongguo wenhua yanjiu* 隐形书写--90年代中国文化研究 (Invisible writing: Chinese cultural studies in the 1990s). (Nanjing: Jiangsu renmin chubanshe, 1999), 13-14.

Yearnings is a typical melodrama and it shapes the character Liu Huifang, who is an idealized, completely selfless and sacrificing wife and mother. In her warm character and the melodramatic narrative of the drama, a model of the new family and standard subject was set. Moreover, the melodramatic narrative transformed social problems into domestic and moral issues. As Wang Shuo, one of the scriptwriters, commented: “It is easy to arouse the audiences’ sympathy and makes it dramatic when the good persons are extremely kind-hearted, and at the same time extremely tragic.”⁶ In *Yearnings*, the audiences saw the miserable Huifang and contemptible people like her selfish husband Wang Husheng. In the highly emotional state, all the problems and tragedies are blamed on the “evilness” in the drama. The tensions between the state and people in history and the tension generated in the contemporary social transformation are all turned into the tension between “good person” and “contemptible person.” Because of the “persecution of the good,” “moral polarization and schematization” and “the strong emotionalism” in the drama, the audiences’ attention was directed to the “stark ethical conflict” and internalized the moral cultivation.⁷ People strongly identified with Huifang, and thus also the traditional virtues and motherliness she embodied, as well as the harmonious family she longed for. As Lisa Rofel argued, “The construction of this inner self occurs through public allegories. In watching television shows, people learn the art of ‘longing’.”⁸

⁶ Geng Bo, “Dianshiju yu zhuanxingqi zhongguo gonggong lingyu de jiangou he shiluo” 电视剧与转型期中国公共领域的建构和失落 (TV dramas and the construction and failure of public sphere in China during the transformation era), *Xiandai chuanbo* (Modern Communication), 2011(10).

⁷ Peter Brooks summarizes the major features of melodrama: “the indulgence of strong emotionalism,” “moral polarization and schematization” and “persecution of the good.” Through the “high emotionalism” and “stark ethical conflict,” the major function of melodrama is to achieve moral cultivation. See Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), 11-12.

⁸ Lisa Rofel, *Desiring China: Experiments in Neoliberalism, Sexuality, and Public Culture*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 6.

Huifang's qualities and virtues were what the state ideology and mainstream culture advocate since her character soothed the anxiety in society.

Moreover, the traditional virtues and harmonious family are in fact built on the sacrifice of women like Huifang. The ultimate powerful judges are still men, like Luo Gang and Wang's father – representing two generations of intellectuals persecuted during the Cultural Revolution and now return and become the “new heroes of the nation.”⁹ In the late 1990s, TV dramas changed significantly, containing less idealized figures together with more realistic detail and societal issues, such as one of the most popular dramas *Qianshou* (Hand in Hand, 1998-99), which is about an extramarital love affair and divorce. However, patriarchy still penetrates and the traditional virtues of women are still advocated, for the mistress leaves voluntarily because of the wife's virtues, and other men love her for her motherly character.

LGBT Community in Mainland China

Though scholars like Chou Wah-shan trace the history of Chinese homosexuality back to pre-modern China, homosexuality in the modern period is actually a “rediscovery” as LGBT created sexual identities in the modern era. Homosexuals began to appear in modern Chinese laws, official documents, the public sphere, etc. In the 1990s, the opening of society has led to more open knowledge about sexuality, and LGBT, though still to a large extent invisible in the society in the 1990s, formed their own communities.

⁹ Ibid., 60.

Yet they were always linked to AIDS and immorality, if not totally nonexistent to the public.

In 1985, the term *tongxinglian* (homosexual) first appeared in government documents because of the government's concern for AIDS and public health. In 1987, an official document from the Department of Health to the State Council states that "non-public prostitution and homosexuals provide the condition of the spread of AIDS."¹⁰ As to the narrative in Chinese laws, homosexual is classified as "Hooligan" which appeared in law and governmental documents since 1950s.¹¹ The abolition of the "Hooligan Crime" in 1997 is generally taken as the signal of de-criminalization of homosexuality, yet there was still a lot of stigma associated with homosexuality, as it appeared in the conclusion of a law suit in 1999, "Homosexuality is a kind of sexual perversion that cannot be accepted by the public in China."¹²

Homosexuality was not only oppressed by the law, but also by family, media, popular culture, government politics, etc. Family often was the most formidable obstacle for LGBT, especially when individuals were very much attached to family as a traditional Chinese value. Marriage was a grave problem. Many homosexuals left home to avoid the pressure to marry from their family, and some even committed suicide. Meanwhile, stories of homosexual violence published in magazines and newspapers in the early 1990s, as well as twisted homosexual images in Hong Kong movies, created a negative impression of homosexuals among the society.¹³ Many people actually did not know

¹⁰ Zhou Dan. *Aiyue yu guixun : Zhongguo xiandaixing zhong tongxing yuwan de falixiangxiang* 爱悦与规训：中国现代性中同性欲望的法理想象 (Pleasure and discipline: jurisprudential imagination of homosexuality in Chinese modernity) (Guilin: Guangxi shifan daxue chubanshe, 2009), 9.

¹¹ Ibid., 209.

¹² Ibid., 214.

¹³ Ibid., 38-39. An Keqiang found many news stories about homosexuals, but most of them are about twisted relationships or homicide cases written in romantic novella style instead of news report. For

there is such thing as homosexuality in China and believed this “phenomenon” only exists in the West. Many people who knew about homosexuals were strongly convinced that they were disgusting freaks, with a dissolute sex life but no deep sentiments, and should be punished by law, etc. These negative impressions, which are due to the ignorance about LGBT, led to repression and considerable pressure for homosexuals to come out from the closet to their family and the public.

On November 22, 1992, the first semi-public homosexual organization “Men’s World” was established by the Chinese Health Education Research Institution in Beijing. Yet the organization was shut down within half a year when officials claimed the organization was spreading wrong notions, which was not opposing, but encouraging homosexuals: “It violates the principles of Chinese health education and thus has to be stopped.” One of the major problems for LGBT community to go public has been that they have had to form organization and organize public activities to fight for their rights since they were marginalized and seldom heard by the public. Yet organizations and their activities, especially in the public sphere, were closely monitored and restricted especially when they touched some sensitive issues. Some scholars in the 1990s put the situation this way: “since many laws are still unclear and sometimes it is uncertain how the laws would be interpreted and carried out, nobody wants to be the sacrifice.”¹⁴

Main Questions

example, “Ai, zai zheli niuqu” 爱，在这里扭曲 (Love is twisted here) (*Chinese Women Magazine*, 1990.6.), “Tongxinglian ming’an” 同性恋命案 (Homosexual homicide) (*People’s Police Newspaper*, 1990.2.)

¹⁴ An Keqiang, *Hongtaiyang xia de heilinghun : dalu tongxinglian xianchang baodao* 紅太陽下的黑靈魂：大陸同性戀現場報導 (The black soul under the red sun: live reports on homosexuals in Mainland China) (Taipei Shi: Shibao wenhua chuban qiye youxiangongsi, 1995), 23.

The two movies are in fact extremely different in style, yet both are concerned with the homosexual community and are the first to present gays and lesbians on the screen. Both directors exposed the invisible space of society and re-examined the construction and discourse of sexuality and morality in the public sphere. LGBT groups were unwelcome by either the state or the majority of society, yet the alternative subjectivity as well as alternative family and social relationships that deviated from the mainstream expectations are exactly what both directors looked for. Through showing the deviant subjects who are the outsiders to the heteronormative society and being able to challenge and destabilize the supposedly rigid heterosexual based sexual morality, these two movies question the orthodox discourse of sexuality, morality and subjectivity disciplined in the homophobic public, which, to a certain extent, collaborate with the state. In this thesis, through discussing homosexual subjects in the movies, I want to examine how the norms of sexual ethics discipline sexual subjectivity and gender relationships.

In the next chapter, I will first discuss Zhang Yuan's film *Dong gong xi gong* (East Palace, West Palace) from the perspective of sexual subjects, state power and public morality. Both the scriptwriter Wang Xiaobo and the movie director Zhang Yuan were interested in the relationship between power and sexuality. Through exposing the invisible and "despicable" queer space which is oppressed by both the state and the mass, the film leads us to re-examine the "orthodox" discourse of sexual morality and public morality, and further raises questions about the state's power in this realm and the mass' collusion.

Li Yu's film was made in 2001, and the 1990s refers to the decade of the 1990s and the early 21st century. The discussion on Li Yu's film *Jinnian xiatian* (English title: *Fish*

and Elephant) in the third chapter focuses more on gender hierarchy, and sexual morality which places regulations on domestic sphere and disciplines female subjects. The marketization and social transformation also affects the family. Material life becomes an essential evaluation in marriage and family relationships. Because of the legacy from the past and the dependent status of most women in the society, women are still largely bounded with and restricted within the family whereas men are dominant in the public sphere. Lesbians are even more invisible than gay men. Through exploring the life and sentiments of lesbians, Li Yu shows the discipline arising from the sexual ethics imposed on women, and shows an alternative status, declaring the possibility of female independence both socially and sentimentally.

Sex in Public, “Despicable” Quality and the Legitimacy of Heteronormativity in *East Palace, West Palace*

East Palace, West Palace is the first gay film in Mainland China. It was directed by Zhang Yuan, one of the most prominent figures among the “sixth generation” of Chinese film directors, and the script was written by Wang Xiaobo, a famous contemporary writer in the 1990s. The movie presents the relationship between A Lan, a masochistic gay man, and Xiaoshi, a sadistic cop. Xiaoshi catches A Lan making love with his lover at the park and he takes A Lan back to the police station, followed by a whole night of interrogation. Being in love with Xiaoshi, A Lan reveals his stories to Xiaoshi and his “confession” turns into seduction. Before Xiaoshi notices, he is gradually attracted to A Lan and his latent homoerotic desire is elicited. At the end of the film, when the whole night of interrogation is over and the sun rises above the city, Xiaoshi, who was originally the executor and symbol of state power, falls into the “trap” of homoerotic desire and the game of power, and turns into one of the “despicable” gay men like A Lan. It is not only a story of oppressor and the oppressed, and it is far more than a simple binary between the subject and the “other.”

I would first discuss homosexuality in the public sphere and how sex is policed in public space in the name of public morality, public order and public health. Interpreting the sado-masochistic relationship between Xiaoshi and A Lan, heteronormativity which justifies and sustains the power of policing, is questioned and overturned in Xiaoshi’s failure to maintain his authority using masculinity and violence. In this process, the relationship between subject and the “other” is being reexamined. Furthermore, through discussing the keyword in the movie *jian* (despicable, cheap), we examine the

relationship between naming and subjects. More importantly, the accusation of despicable quality leads to shameful feeling in the category of sexual ethics and make a strong effect in shaping the subjects.

Policing Sex in Public Space

The idea of making a film about gay men occurred to Zhang Yuan when he read several articles in the Chinese magazine *Shenghuo xiaoxi* (News of Life) in the early 1990s. In one of the articles, he read that an AIDS research institution in Beijing wanted to get statistics of LGBT in Beijing and asked for the park police's help. The police arrested those whom they thought were homosexuals and had them fill out the forms for investigation. "I don't understand," Zhang Yuan said, "Why were the police interested helping the research institution? And why could not the research institution find some easier way to get the information they needed?" These questions aroused his interest in the issue of homosexuality in contemporary China. In the process of creating the script, he found the answer: "It is power."¹⁵ In this film, the disciplinary power is examined in depth. First, it is about how sex is policed in public space.

Sex was being policed in public and homosexuality was no doubt one of the most obvious targets. In China, homosexuals are often linked to "sodomy," "hooliganism" and AIDS, which implies abnormal, immoral and unsanitary sex. In legal codes before 1997, there was no clear code concerning homosexuals, and the definition and regulation of homosexuality was put in the category of "hooliganism." From 1950s, "hooligan"

¹⁵ Chris Berry and Zhang Yuan, "Daoyan Zhangyuan caifanglu" (Interview with Director Zhang Yuan), *Nanjing yishu xueyuan xuebao (yinyue ji biao yan ban)* (Journal of Nanjing Arts Institute Music & Performance), 2000 (02), n. page.

(*liumang*) became an official term in political and law documents, and homosexual behavior was taken as committing the crime of “hooliganism.”¹⁶ Not until 1997 was “hooliganism” deleted from the penal code, and though this change was not particularly about explaining homosexuality in Chinese law, this is still regarded as the decriminalization of homosexuals in China.¹⁷ From the Maoist period on, hooligans were viewed as the second biggest threat to the socialist order and state institutions after “counter-revolutionaries.”¹⁸ “‘Hooligan’ as a legal term and identity appeared and developed in the process of establishing socialist China and maintaining socialist political and public order.”¹⁹ “Hooligan law” was enforced in 1979, and it included “insulting women or engaging in any hooligan activities.”²⁰ Though it did not specifically refer to LGBT, there were cases in which homosexuals were declared guilty as hooligans. In the 1990s, public space was, to a large extent, desexualized and sex was policed in public space. Being defined as hooligans, homosexuals were the “others” in this social, political and legal system. Gay men in the movies were arrested as criminals because they made out in “public space” (which is ironically “invisible public space”). Their normal sexual activity was defined as “hooliganism,” because their sexuality deviated from heterosexual norms and was thus considered immoral, which is further assumed as a threat to societal order in public space.

¹⁶ Zhou, 209.

¹⁷ Zhou, 227.

¹⁸ Zhu Dake, *Liumang de shengyan: dangdai Zhongguo de liumang xushi*. 流氓的盛宴：当代中国的流氓叙事 (The festival of hooligans: the hooligan narrative in contemporary China). (Beijing Shi: Xinxing chubanshe, 2006), 8.

¹⁹ Zhou, 211.

²⁰ Chen Liyong, *Zhongguo tongxinglian diaocha* 中国同性恋调查 (Investigation of Chinese homosexuality), (Beijing: Zhongguo she hui ke xue chu ban she, 2004), Preface.

Homosexuality is often linked with AIDS, insanitary sex and filthiness²¹, which relates to the issue of public health and public hygiene. Public hygiene is a big concern in the state's control of public space, and hygiene also relates to *suzhi* and sexual morality. Though homosexuality started to gain some understanding in the 1980s, after AIDS broke out in China, the declining homophobia rebounded. As Susan Sontag observed, AIDS has a dual metaphoric genealogy: invasion and pollution.²² While the dreaded disease is envisaged as an alien "other," "the move from the demonization of the illness to the attribution of fault to the patient is an inevitable one, no matter if patients are thought of as victims."²³ Because of AIDS, homosexual activity is further rejected as insanitary and harmful sex, and consequently, homosexuals are further demonized as a potentially expanding threat. Moreover, since many gay men often gather at public toilets, the impression of gay men is often linked to filthiness. Sanitation is the sign of a "civilized society," and it becomes the sign that differentiates different social classes. Therefore, filthiness and homosexuals are further associated with low-quality people, and this reinforces the stigma of their sexual morality.

However, the negative impression of gay men, which was supposed to improve public health, did not work out well, but quite the opposite. These negative images in public hygiene discourse intensified the hostility against gay men, and reinforced the existing sexual morality. Feelings of shame made gay men afraid to reveal their orientation in the public sphere, and consequently worsened the condition of AIDS prevention and cure. The agenda of public health and hygiene is in fact, to a certain extent, linked to the political control and the oppression against deviant subjects. The aversion to sexuality

²¹ Gay men in China often have sex in free public toilets.

²² Susan Sontag, *AIDS and its Metaphors*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1989), 17.

²³ *Ibid.*, 11.

and “abnormal” sexuality (e.g. homosexuality) were taken as a support for public health. The ideology hidden in this discourse of public health in “civilized society” was making sex unspeakable in public and contains discrimination against sexual perversion.

Nevertheless, both the public order and public hygiene are challenged in the highlighted space of “public toilet” in the film. Zhang Yuan and Wang Xiaobo both had strong interest in the image of the public toilet. East Palace, West Palace actually refers to the names of public toilets on the two sides of Tiananmen Square, where gay men gather and meet each other. In the film, the public toilet is an ambiguous space blurring the boundary of public and private, power and sexual desire. Its special ambiguity is because of its filthiness. Wang Xiaobo once discussed public toilet in his essay “Chenmo de daduoshu”沉默的大多数(The silent majority):

In those silent years, there was still gossip spreading around and this gossip broke the silent atmosphere. Luckily, we only spread gossip in particular circumstances, for instance, at the public toilets. At least when someone investigated the rumors, we could say this: I heard this at the toilet! In this way, the gossip became flapdoodles during excretion, and thus should not be treated seriously. In addition, though public toilets are public space, but I have a strong desire to rule it out, because it is too filthy.²⁴

He notices the ambiguity and possibility that could be found in a space like the public toilet. The public toilet, a filthy public space where people could spread words outside legitimate (state) ideology, is a fissure both (reluctantly) acknowledged and unacknowledged in the public space, where mainstream ideology takes control. In one of

²⁴ Wang Xiaobo, “Chenmo de da duoshu” 沉默的大多数 (The silent majority)
<http://www.tianyabook.com/wangxiaobo/007.htm>

Wang's novellas, "Gemingshiqi de aiqing"(Romantic Love during the Revolutionary Era), the protagonist Wang Er secretly draws a naked woman on the wall of the public toilet and the hunt for this "hooligan" begins. Secret sexual desire is displaced in this "public space" and it is exactly in this ambiguous space that the "orthodox" sexual discourse is interrupted. Particularly in this ambiguous space, the deviant desires are secretly released and the "orthodox" ideology can no longer take entire control. Zhang Yuan is also very interested in public toilets. In a recent film *It Looks Beautiful*, Zhang uses public toilets in the kindergarten to illustrate how the discursive power functions in regulating children's behavior in this "public space." In *East Palace, West Palace*, though it is public space, yet ironically, it is also the space where the least privacy can be retained, since often there are no partitions or no doors in the public toilets. Therefore, the public toilet is a public space but also a very private space that people do not like. Such a space becomes the perfect location to show the power discipline intertwining with the personal sexual desire. In the public toilet in the film, a park administrator with a red armband accuses A Lan of peeping at him when they were both at the public toilet. Desire is displayed in an ambiguous way: since both men have had their backs to the camera, it is hard to tell what exactly has happened. Is it that A Lan peeped at the administrator? Is it that the administrator slanders A Lan because he is afraid of gays in the park? Or is it that the administrator slanders A Lan because he has secret deviant sexual desire? This ambiguous space, on one hand, signifies the living condition of LGBT, who struggle to preserve themselves in the ambiguous space which is not clearly divided or defined. On the other hand, it implies possible new boundaries and the possibilities under the control of state power. Meanwhile, A Lan's response sharply

points out the loophole, which would turn the accusation based on heteronormativity against itself: “What do you have to hide, anyway?” If there is absolutely no homoerotic desire in this man’s mind, then “peeping” between men would be perfectly normal and thus there would be no reason for him to be afraid of being peeped at. When the man accuses A Lan and intends to rule out perversion from this “normal” society, he has also acknowledged the existence of sexual desire between men.

Michael Warner, in his work *The Trouble with Normal*, points out that the binary between public and private should be questioned, since “the dominant culture of privacy wants you to lie about this corporeal publicness.”²⁵ The ambiguity between public and private, political power and private sexual desires do not only exist in the public toilets. The police arrest and interrogation is very suspicious. When Xiaoshi found A Lan making out with a gay man, he did not rush to arrest them, but silently stood aside and watched. This scene echoes an interview in Li Yinhe’s research on homosexuality. A gay interviewer recounts his horrible experience of an interrogation at a police office. He was arrested by the police and was threatened that if he did not go back to be educated, his family and work unit (danwei) would be informed about his homosexuality, which is what he feared the most. He thus had no choice but to go back the second day and was subjected to intense interrogation. The police even asked him to act out the gay’s sexual intercourse movements, which was a severe humiliation to the man.²⁶ Such shameless conduct of the police is not purely “political” and “public” official procedure, but it is to satisfy voyeurism. The state’s interference in a homosexual’s public sex is problematic

²⁵ Michael Warner, *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life*. (New York: Free Press, 1999), 178.

²⁶ Li Yinhe, *Tongxinglian yawenhua* 同性恋亚文化 (Subculture of homosexuality). (Beijing: Zhongguo youyi chubanshe, 2002), 393-394.

since it violates sexual privacy. Yet Warner points out “the ‘zone of privacy’ was recognized ... only for the domestic space of heterosexuals. The legal tradition, in other words, tends to protect sexual freedom by privatizing it, and now it also reserves privacy protections for those whose sexuality is already normative.”²⁷

In the film, the voyeuristic desire has been proven a major threat to Xiaoshi. His desire to probe into A Lan’s personal and sexual life triggers his homoerotic desire and starts the reversion. The more Xiaoshi grills out of A Lan, the more he knows about A Lan and the deeper he probes into A Lan’s world. A Lan’s confession has become “the trap” which secretly arouses Xiaoshi’s empathy and homoerotic desires. He gradually begins to listen quietly to A Lan’s stories. After listening quietly to the most humiliating moment of A Lan’s life, Xiaoshi does not say anything, but gently gives A Lan his cigarette, watches him smoke it, and then takes it from him and tosses it on the floor. That is the unprecedented silent and intimate moment between the two, which indicates that Xiaoshi has gradually indulged himself in A Lan’s world. The sharing of a cigarette even implies that Xiaoshi is already unwittingly feeling intimacy with A Lan and recognizes himself as one of A Lan’s people. They are no longer despicable to him. Following this ironic intimate interaction, A Lan continues telling the story of the thief and the guard, which is staged in a traditional Chinese dramatic setting. For the first time, the world of A Lan’s story connects to his real world. “In ancient times...” A Lan starts the story in the police station, and in the next scene, with the same line, they are walking in a dark valley, where A Lan is leading Xiaoshi, slowly walking in the dark. With the story going, they walk through the darkness and arrive at the lightened stage where the thief and the guard are performing behind the gauze. This stage and drama in the dark

²⁷ Warner, 174.

belong to people like A Lan, and that is the turning point when Xiaoshi obediently follows A Lan into his world, so that now he shares the world with A Lan.

SM Relationship and Legitimacy of Heteronormativity

Granted power by the legal system, more importantly by the government/state, Xiaoshi is one of the policemen who has executed power over gay men in the movie and policed sex in public, and his political identity is crucial in the movie. Police are the symbol of the state in the 1990s. They not only represented the law, but more importantly, represented arbitrary state power. In the 1990s, ordinary people would not want to challenge the police because people did not have much faith in the legal system, and there were plenty of cases which the police, conspiring with governmental power, could arbitrarily wield legal power and exert state violence. Moreover, the corruption within the police system, on one hand, caused people's distrust and dissatisfaction with the legal system, yet on the other hand, aroused fear among the mass. Yet in this film the police interrogation is like a stage where the complex and interwoven relationship between political power and sexual desire is displayed. In the end, when A Lan "successfully" seduces Xiaoshi and turns him into one of the "abnormal" and "immoral" group, the legitimacy and stability of heteronormativity and the state's regulation of public space and public sex are shown to be arbitrary and unjust.

At the beginning of the film, the policemen and the gay men are clearly separated into two groups, and Xiaoshi is one of policemen who chases and punishes gay men in the park. In the first arrest, the night is dark, and gay men in the park are running everywhere like rats. In contrast, the police are all in uniforms, they chase the gays and treat them as

criminals. In the first few scenes, both the gay men and the policemen are facing away from the camera, their faces are covered in the dark shadow of the trees and can barely be seen, or shown through a high angle shot, in which faces cannot be seen, but the distinction between the oppressing group and the oppressed group is clearly marked. Here, the state power and the minority are clearly divided and no specific individuals can be pointed out without seeing their faces. Xiaoshi, in the green uniform, is a noticeable symbol of state power that executes state violence. But when A Lan kisses Xiaoshi on his cheek during the first arrest, things began to change. Xiaoshi's identification and their identities become uncertain during the process of interrogation and the sado-masochistic relationship secretly begins to develop. The interrelation of the two individuals and the formation of subjectivity are unfolded in this process.

The second time Xiaoshi arrests A Lan, he takes A Lan back to the park police station, and begins the interrogation. Throughout the interrogation, Xiaoshi experiences deep doubt and transformation of his sexual identification and his political and authoritative identity.

As a policeman and interrogator who wields state power, Xiaoshi tries to keep the interrogation on track. Yet the interrogation is not what Xiaoshi has expected. Instead, it constantly and subtly goes off track. Several times throughout the interrogation A Lan does not directly answer Xiaoshi's question, but begins to tell his own stories in his own pace. For example, in one scene, A Lan is describing his feeling emotionally:

A Lan: I wanted to cry but could not. At dawn, there was a mist. It was cold. Suddenly, birds began to sing throughout the forest, and I realized that I was alive!

Xiaoshi (At that moment, Xiaoshi suddenly jumps from his chair and shouts):
Bullshit! You are crazy! Where do you think you are? Cool down. Do you know what you are? Despicable!

A Lan has gotten out of Xiaoshi's control, and instead of being grilled, he is more like making a confession out of his own will. Sensing the unusual atmosphere of the interrogation, Xiaoshi begins to use an angry and authoritative tone, which shows the uncertainty and anxiety he feels about his self-identification. At the very moment before his sudden angry outburst, Xiaoshi temporarily forgets his identity as an executor of state power and becomes lost in A Lan's memory, and it is at that very moment, he implicitly realizes the "danger" in his identification. This time, like every other time whenever he gets anxious and uncertain about his self-identification, he tries to act the role of a powerful policeman again and tries to control A Lan, covering his anxiety by wielding the state power and exerting violence on A Lan.

Xiaoshi at these moments appears even more violent and masculine than usual. He repeatedly acts the role of an executor of state power in a hyper-masculine way, in order to take control of the interrogation, reassure himself of his superiority, and deny his secret homoerotic desire. Ironically, the violence and hyper-masculinity in Xiaoshi's actions, which are supposed to be the assurance of state control, turn into the features of sadistic behavior when Xiaoshi begins to enjoy the sexual pleasure in it. Rather than forming the symbol of the state, violence and masculinity support the formation of an "abnormal" sexual subject, which immediately marks the illegality of the violence and masculinity of this state servant in the name of the state. After all, pleasure and power function as mechanisms with double impetus, as Foucault observes:

Power operated as a mechanism of attraction; it drew out those peculiarities over which it kept watch. Pleasure spread to the power that harried it; power anchored the pleasure it uncovered.

The pleasure that comes of exercising a power that questions, monitors, watches, spies, searches out, palpates, brings to light; and on the other hand, the pleasure that kindles at having to evade this power, flee from it, fool it, or travesty it. The power that lets itself be invaded by the pleasure it is pursuing; and opposite it, power asserting itself in the pleasure of showing off, scandalizing, or resisting.²⁸

“The game of power” is fully implanted and performed in the film through the relationship between Xiaoshi and A Lan. This performance further exposes the operation of disciplinary power and subjectivity legitimized by the state.

The sadomasochistic relationship disrupts the “normal” political order and challenges the orthodoxy of heteronormativity. The subject and the “other” need to be reexamined, so that the attitude and the role of the “other” (A Lan) can also decide the relationship and the subject.

A bad subject like A Lan is debunking the perfect sham of heteronormativity, and unfolds the operation of disciplinary power. A Lan is the masochist in their relationship. In contrast to Xiaoshi’s masculine, powerful and dominant figure, A Lan is soft and submissive. Yet submission of masochists does not mean losing “the war,” but rather, his attitude changes the rule of the game. The sado-masochistic relationship is a game of power. In sadomasochistic relationships, exerting and suffering violence is the way to obtain pleasure, and for the masochist, sexual pleasure does not generate from violent domination, but from submission and suffering from violence. Though A Lan is the

²⁸ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 45.

“hooligan” in the film, he does not act like a criminal who usually suffers a lot in the interrogation. Instead, he enjoys the whole process and even takes charge of the interrogation by turning it into telling his own story, such as the way he tells Xiaoshi about his desire since childhood:

A Lan: Later, when I was an adult, I saw a policeman walking through the park, and suddenly my dream came true! He arrested me, but then let me go. I cannot say he was not kind, but I really want to give myself to him.

Xiaoshi: Give yourself to the policeman? That is a good one.

When A Lan “confesses” his masochism, the whole story is suddenly reversed: the arrest is not the oppression of A Lan’s desires, but the opposite. Not only does A Lan successfully seduce Xiaoshi and expose him to a crisis of self-identification, but even more, state violence sarcastically provokes sexual desire and the whole state law and institution of regulating sexuality and individuals looks ridiculous. A Lan unexpectedly discloses the relationship between power and pleasure. He reveals another vision of the relationship between power and the oppressed, such as Li Yinhe pointed out:

The absolute submission of the masochist is even more powerful than violent resistance. Because he doesn't resist, he can suffer more. His submission triumphs over the invader's order; his humiliating and ludicrousness weakens authority; his acceptance of power is the preparation for overthrowing power.²⁹

A Lan tells a story of the thief and the jail keeper which is the metaphor for A Lan and Xiaoshi's relationship. At the climax of the movie, when A Lan obeys Xiaoshi's

²⁹ Li Yinhe, *Nüelien Yawenhua* 虐恋亚文化 (Subculture of sadomasochism). (Beijing: Zhongguo youyi chubanshe, 2002), 206.

order and puts on a woman's dress, he tells the last part of the story, in which the thief escapes from the executioner and lay down before the jail keeper's door.

He does not know how she escaped from the executioner, but he knows he will no longer escape from his love for her. This is his destiny.

The jail keeper has become the prisoner of love, the prisoner of his own desire. In other words, he is forced by the power, which generates from his desire, to love the thief. The thief is completely submissive, and for the thief, complete submission does not really mean submitting to conquest in the relationship. When she submits herself to the jail keeper, he is forced to accept. In this way, he is bound by the relationship and has to submit to his desire as well as the role he had to play in the relationship.

Such a relationship reveals that the subject is determined in the relationship by each other. Violence does not necessarily develop the relationship of the oppressor and the oppressed, but can turn into other possibilities, as A Lan has already demonstrated. The formation of a relationship depends on reactions and responses between subjects involved in the relationship. Like A Lan and the thief, when they start to recognize the pleasure in violence, they make it impossible for the "oppressors" to become oppressors. Their reactions change the relationship as well as the subjects. Just like the words Wang wrote in the fictional version: "Such love is absolute, and such devotion is absolute. You cannot refuse." Though it seems that the power executors are powerful, they cannot control the absolute love and despair in the "prisoners," and they are not able to reject such absolute love and devotion. Because of this, they are restrained.

Shame and Subversion

During the interrogation, A Lan is repeatedly denounced as a cheap, despicable person without self-respect, which, in Chinese word, is the word “jian” 贱. “Jian” is a keyword in *East Palace, West Palace*. Zhang Yuan’s emphasis on this “despicable” characteristic was largely influenced by Wang Xiaobo, as Zhang Yuan mentioned in an interview that Wang had repeatedly discussed on the word “jian” with him. The despicable characteristic is not rare in Wang’s novels. In one of his most popular novellas, *Golden Times*, during the Cultural Revolution the female protagonist Chen Qingyang is called “broken shoe,” which refers to loose women. “Jian” is a strongly humiliating word which is attached to shameful feeling. Shame and pride are crucial in LGBT issues, for these relate to their self-identification and attitudes when facing the discrimination and oppression from the public and people around them. Moreover, shame is closely related to sexual morality. Words like “jian,” which would arouse strong shameful feelings, contribute to justifying sexual morality and disciplining individual subjects. As Michael Warner observes:

. . . “sleaze,” “filth,” and “smut.” These words, conceptually vacuous, do nothing to say why porn is bad. It is impossible to argue with them; their purpose is not to provide reasoned argument. Their purpose is to throw shame, to make a rival point of view seem unimaginable.³⁰

Shameful feelings, compared to violent oppression, are sometimes even more devastating to homosexuals, especially to people around them. As the gay interviewer confessed, he would rather be humiliated by the police than being exposed to his work unit and family.

³⁰ Warner, 181.

As the accusation of “jian” is effective in causing strong feelings of shame, strengthening “normal” and “decent” sexual ethics, and making subjects, Wang and Zhang chose to start their strategy of deconstruction exactly from that. Analyzing the description of Chen Qingyan in *Golden Times* helps to clarify the “socialist tradition” in disciplining subjects through naming. “Broken shoe” is an extremely insulting name to women, but Chen Qingyang’s reaction has an interesting logic which unfolds the relationship between naming and moral accusation, power and subjects. Chen Qingyang feels insulted not because she feels humiliated for being degraded as a loose woman, but because of the fact that she is called the “broken shoe” when she is not. In order to make the fact match the name, she has sex with Wang Er and becomes a real “broken shoe.” In this process from “naming” to “becoming/being,” the relationship between name, moral discourse and subject is highlighted. Naming becomes essential in the formation of subjects in the “socialist tradition.” Such a relationship between naming and the formation of the subject is especially typical during the Cultural Revolution when the overwhelming ideology excessively disciplined subjects. Even after the Cultural Revolution, naming and moral discipline still implicitly work in society.

In China, as both shown in *East Palace, West Palace* and *Golden Times*, “jian” often relates to sex. In *East Palace, West Palace*, similar to Chen Qingyang, a pretty girl in A Lan’s middle school is degraded as a “public bus,” which implies that everyone can sleep with her. Both “public bus” and A Lan are denounced as “jian” in the film. Chen Qingyang and the “public bus” are named “broken shoe” because they are beautiful and sexually attractive women, and A Lan is accused of being despicable because of his feminine character and masochism. “Jian” is used to denounce all the dangerous or

deviant sexual desires, and the “abnormal” and dangerous subjects would be excluded in this way. The hyper-masculinity (from the revolutionary era) of the state is moralized through people’s daily life. Men must be masculine subjects, or else they would be viewed as aliens and despised as freak. “Jian,” if viewed as a moral judgment, is the morality of a hyper-masculine, strict heterosexual moral institution, which closely relates to the state ideology, which is normally represented by people like Xiaoshi, a masculine subject (in the heterosexual category) who executes state power. As a matter of fact, these accusations expose the danger of sexuality, which can possibly go beyond the control of political power. The sexual attraction aroused by women like “public bus,” the femininity in a male body like A Lan, are all threatening to the masculine subjects justified by the state, and therefore excluded as “the other.” Through denouncing despicable people, male and female subjects are properly regulated in the sexual moral standards. The exposure of unregulated sexuality reveals the invisible space and underground trend inside the Chinese society.

Yet intriguingly, in *East Palace, West Palace*, when A Lan is insulted and degraded as a despicable person, he is not eager to fight back. Instead, he somehow ambiguously recognizes Xiaoshi’s words and identifies with such a despicable character. This could be interpreted as the natural behavior of a masochist, though this mentality is not rare in Wang Xiaobo’s fiction. “Jian,” which is defined by moral discourse, is used strategically to deconstruct the dominant moral discourse. A Lan in *East Palace, West Palace* does not anxiously repudiate the accusation, and even more, it seems that this stigma of “jian” has become part of his self-identification. As sexual morality and ideology are largely conducted through the feeling of shame, the shameless figures in Wang’s novels become

points of inversion or reversal. Masochism makes A Lan not suffer terribly, but to a certain extent, enjoy the shameful feeling in sexual experience. Masochists, through self-denigration and absolute self-abandon achieve spiritual pleasure.³¹ Instead of being ashamed of themselves and automatically self-disciplined within the institution, they “denigrate” themselves by accepting the stigma, and intriguingly, in this case, the political discourse is not able to function properly as it supposed to. By identifying with their stigmatized and illegal identities, they invert the logic and undermine the authority of naming, and invalidate the political power in its discourse.

In the novel, the feeling of “jian” can be traced back to “public bus.” In a sense, she can be regarded as A Lan’s enlightener and inspire A Lan to embrace the feeling of “jian” as self-identification. “Public bus” believes that she was born “jian,” so as everyone else. She once told A Lan, “ ‘Jian’ is inborn, and you can never change it. The more you want to hide it, the more despicable you are. The only way to get rid of it is to admit that you are ‘jian,’ and try to like it.” To complement the understanding of “jian” in the film, there’s a scene in the novel when “public bus” undresses herself and lets A Lan see her without shame. A Lan recalls the moment and says, “At that moment, ‘public bus’ did not look despicable at all, and she was nothing like the person I saw before. Her body was in good shape and her skin was white. The curve of her breast and lower abdomen was beautiful too. Only when she put on her clothes and hid herself, does she look despicable.”³² The inborn “jian” becomes despicable because it is defined so in process of exclusion and discrimination created by the dominating and thus “normal” people. When

³¹ Li, Yinhe. *Nüe lian ya wenhua*, 191.

³² Wang, Xiaobo, *Si shui rou qing*. 似水柔情 (Sentiments like water) (Beijing: Jinri Zhongguo chubanshe, 1998), 16.

they are trying to cover the fact that they are despicable, they are identifying with the institution that oppresses them and become the coconspirators of the oppression. “Normal” people live in the illusion created by dominant ideology, experiencing the “decent love,” “decent morality,” “decent action,” which are within the institution of heterosexuality and consistent with heteronormal morality, excluding the opposite (the quality of “jian,” for example). This echoes the *suzhi* discourse, of which the decent morality would degrade anything “jian” as uncivilized and prescribe that subjects should cultivate themselves, maintain their moral behavior, and try to conform themselves to the standard subjects who have high quality.

Yet it is in the shameful feeling and pleasure of “jian” that the illusion and heteronormal morality are trampled, that they find “real love” where they can no longer find anywhere else. After retelling his most miserable experience of being humiliated and beaten by many people, there comes a close shot of A Lan’s face turning back toward Xiaoshi, the camera, and the audiences while he says, “But this kind of experience makes life worth living.” Only after one acknowledges their “jian” and truly understands that “people live in this world to suffer torment until they die,”³³ can one touch and live a real life, seeing the world without discrimination.

³³ Chen Qingyang’s words from Wang Xiaobo’s novella *The Golden Age*. See Wang Xiaobo. Hongling Zhang, and Jason Sommer, trans. *Wang in Love and Bondage: Three Novellas*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 112.

Lesbian Daughters and Rebellion against Patriarchal Heterosexual Family and Society in *Fish and Elephant*

Fish and Elephant is the first lesbian film in Mainland China. The young director Li Yu filmed several documentaries before that and female sentiments and relationships are the topic that she is interested in. Compared to gay men, lesbians are facing a double dilemma about their sexual identity. Since women had been long repressed and of inferior social status in China, lesbians have to deal with the inequality against women and meanwhile deal with their queer sexual identity.

In *Fish and Elephant*, depicting “special female group,” Li Yu tries to expose the gender hierarchy and problems, and show alternatives for women. First, the discussion will focus on males’ threats to women’s living and working space, and how their gaze would affect the formation of female subjectivity. Second, the discussion moves on to family in the new era and how changes create sexual morality that confines women. The mother-daughter relationship is crucial in shaping the sexual morality, and lesbianism offers an alternative way to reexamine and jump out of the frame of the dominant sexual morality. The last section explores how deviant sexuality makes compromises with the heterosexual public.

Male Dominance and Gaze

In this movie, Li’s main concern is women’s life and sentiments under the male-privileged gender hierarchy. Concerned with the female subject, Li notices the tension between lesbians and traditional Chinese women the performance of sexuality. The film

fully presents how male desires in this heterosexual and patriarchal society shape female images and female subjects. I would list three scenes in the film. The first one is at Ling's self-designed clothes shop. A girl is choosing clothes at Ling's shop with her boyfriend. When the girl picks up a sexy camisole, the boyfriend scolds her and meanly says that it is clothing for a prostitute. When the girl breaks up with her boyfriend later, she goes back to Ling's shop and buys the camisole. The second scene is when Ling breaks with her boyfriend and is ready to start a relationship with Qun, she throws away all her make up. The third scene is when Qun's mother starts her relationship with Mr. Zhang, she gives up her favorite clothes color for him. Male dominance includes daily details of life, in this case, the clothes of women, which are the most obvious symbol of the women's femininity and identity. Through constantly practicing what Althusser calls "the rituals of ideological recognition," female individuals are convinced that the subjects implicitly shaped by male desire are who they are or who they ought to be.

The male gaze, on one hand, reinforces performative femininity. Female bodies are shaped by men's gaze, in the heterosexual norms in which females are assumed to properly perform their sexuality. When Qun and her mother met with one of her blind dates, Mr. Zhang (who later becomes Qun's mother's husband), he was surprised and dissatisfied to see Qun smoking. Smoking is "conventionally" a masculine activity, and the repulsion against women who smoke is rooted deeply in heterosexual norms. It is through these daily rituals and conventions that the norms of femininity and masculinity are repeatedly and continuously performed, and discrimination against any deviant behavior and subjects are assured. On the other hand, men's gaze reaffirms the boundary of the domestic sphere for women. Qun's mother gives up her favorite color because of

her prospective husband's words: "An old lady should not dress in showy clothes, since showy women do not know how to keep house." Associating a female's appearance with their domestic role is the desire to further restrain their connection with the outside world, constrain them within the domestic sphere and reaffirm their role in the family. In this aspect, discrimination also goes against women who are outside heterosexual marriage. Just as at the beginning of the movie, when Qun says she has no feelings for men, her male cousin denigrates her as pathological.

Female subjects are disciplined within the heterosexual norms under men's gaze. The director also observes men's threats to women's living conditions and space, especially in public space. There are plenty of scenes displaying men's dominance in public space, through showing both their occupation of space and their gaze at women. In the film, space is clearly separated into male dominant space and female dominant space. Public space, like streets and parks, is dominated by men. At the beginning of the movie, when the protagonist Qun walks across the plaza, we can see many men playing billiards and they occupy the foreground. Qun, who is placed in the middle ground and is the only recognizable woman in the scene, crosses the plaza between men in the foreground and background. Similar scenes, in which a woman walks in space dominated by males, reappear several times in the movie. Women appearing in the public space often look uncomfortable and more or less anxious. The lesbian protagonists, especially Ling, are often harassed by men, and that sometimes affects her work. Ling has been harassed several times by her customers, who in fact do not respect her work or her designs. Lesbians are surrounded by the judgments of men, and once their fragile relationships break up, they easily become the objects of male desires again.

Novels and films that contain female erotic desires created an interesting phenomenon in the 1990s. Tze-Ian Sang examines this phenomenon points out that books which disclose female erotic experience like Lin Bai's work were often denounced as pornographic novels, while paradoxically made successes in the market as these works "fed right into mass voyeurism."³⁴ The denunciation of the writing of female eroticism reflects an obscure gender hierarchy that existed in society. Through constraining female desire within the domestic sphere and disciplining it in the patriarchal family order, the female is placed in an inferior position, and the gender hierarchy can be maintained in the name of moral standards. Yet the "mass voyeurism" that causes the success of these novels, though regarding women as the object of desire, renders the moral standard unconvincing. This echoes the male gaze in Li Yu's film.

Women's Predicament and Rebellious Lesbian Daughters

The function of family changed a lot in the decade of the 1990s together with the social transformation, and the overwhelming marketization penetrates every corner of family life and relationships. As family was no longer under close control of the state and was drawn into the market, it had to compete in the market for social resources and be responsible for its survival. In this process, interpersonal relationships, including couple and family relationships, were deeply affected. In this decade, new problems haunted Chinese families.

³⁴ Sang Tze-ian Deborah, *The Emerging Lesbian: Female Same-Sex Desire in Modern China*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 177-179.

Marketization and the new challenges facing marriage and family had strong influences on women, affecting their roles in society and family. During the planned economy era, when family and individual life were largely organized by state organizations, on the one hand, the equality between men and women was strongly advocated, yet on the other hand, patriarchal power was never completely exterminated in reality.³⁵ When it came to the reform era, women, as well as other people, were pushed into the market and had to struggle to sustain their own livelihood. At that moment, the disparity between men and women, and the privileges of men began to show. A new crisis for women as well as new types of relationships emerged.

In *Fish and Elephant* Li Yu was especially concerned about female subjects in marriage and family. The tension of mother-daughter relationship, which obliquely reflects tensions in family transformations, unfolds the lesbian relationship in the film, which emerges in the daughter's generation. Mother-daughter relationships have always been a significant theme in Li's films. Li Yu asserted in several interviews that "the mother-daughter relationship is essentially the relationship between two women."³⁶ The mother-daughter relationship is crucial to understanding the complicated female-female relationships which interweave female desires, family relationships, women's roles and so forth. The mother figures and mother-daughter relationship in Li Yu's film break the illusion of pure and selfless motherly love. Moreover, motherly love, to a certain extent, turns into a way of disciplining and shaping the daughters' behavior, mindset and sentiments.

³⁵ Danwei, 单位.

³⁶ Li Yu, "Daoyan Li Yu caifang shouji" (Notes of Interview with Director Li Yu). <http://movie.douban.com/review/1018806/>

Mother figures in the movie are always attached to family. Rather than seeing themselves as independent individuals in society, they only see their place within the family. This is similar to Huifang's figure in *Yearning*, since her value is generated through her motherly love, which cannot be separated from her role in the family. In the film, it seems Qun's mother's only function is to establish a family for her daughter, as well as herself. Though Qun's mother failed in her last marriage and did not achieve much love, happiness or feelings of security, she still takes marriage as the only shelter for women. Her admonitions to Qun as well as her words about marriage demonstrate that she concedes heterosexual marriage to be the fate of women. At the dinner with Qun and Ling, she warns Ling do not get picky and get married sooner citing her own example: "Qun's father and I would have divorced even earlier if not for my good temper." She does not care about her own wellbeing and development as an independent individual, but puts the solidarity of family as the first priority, regardless of individual happiness in the family. She is willing to suffer and sacrifice herself for it. She thinks of her suffering as her achievement together with her effort and contribution to the family. The mother of Junjun, Qun's ex-girlfriend, is an even more extreme example. At her young age, Junjun's father raped her more than once, but her mother, in order to keep the family from falling apart, would rather say nothing and pretend nothing has ever happened. It seems these women have suffered a lot and make many sacrifices, but they do not question whether these sacrifices are necessarily contributions to the family.

A reason why these women are so dependent on their husbands and family is that they are not financially independent. As we can see in the film, Qun's mother financially depends on Qun, especially since she has become the only self-sustaining child in the

family after her brother's death. Compared to men, women have not had advantages and their development has been limited in society, which has meant that it is more difficult for them to gain complete financial and social independence.

Research has shown that from the 1990s, many women have suffered from discrimination in job application, salary, promotion and etc. From 1990 to 1999, the pay ratio of urban women to men declined from 77.5:100 to 70.1:100, and in rural areas went from 79:100 to 59.6:100. The number of unemployed women increased in this decade and they were forced to return home.³⁷ Qun's mother mentions to Qun that she has nobody to depend on and that she has to find a man and form a family, as if only men can support a family, which in fact is a valid reason since men have had more privileges and are dominant in society. Juxtaposed with the mother's generation, "lesbian daughters" show a strong will to support their own life and refuse to depend on heterosexual marriage or relationships. Yet their careers and self-sustaining life are under great pressure (just as the hardship which Qun's mother has experienced as a single mother). When Ling wants to end the heterosexual relationship with her boyfriend, she negotiates with him, and eventually she has to give in to exchange her property for her freedom.

It is a vicious circle. Women like Qun's mother are ready to settle for the rules and discipline themselves. This way the males' dominant condition is stabilized. None of Qun's blind dates are looking for a woman they love to marry them. Rather, they are looking for a woman who can take care of their household and family. Mr. Zhang, one of

³⁷ Shi Tong, *Zhongguo shehui zhuanxing shiqi de shehui paiji: Yi guo qi xiangang shiye nü gong wei shi jiao*. 中国社会转型时期的社会排挤——以国企下岗女工为视角 (The discrimination in Chinese transformation era: from the perspective of female workers laid off from national enterprises) (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2004), 107-127 <http://www.modernchinastudies.org/us/issues/past-issues/90-mcs-2005-issue-4/936-2012-01-05-15-34-56.html>

the dates, states his requirements for his future wife: “She should be a virtuous woman in kitchen; she should be a noble lady in the living room; she should be a slut in the bedroom.” Qun replies, “Mr. Zhang, if this were still the 1990s maybe I would admire what you say. But now, it is nothing but a cliché.” Yet ironically, Qun’s mother marries Mr. Zhang at the end of the film. In the early 1990s, Mr. Zhang’s words would be regarded as the bold expression in the context of sexual liberation, these words by the late 1990s and early 2000s, have become the expression of a new form of sexual hierarchy and disparagement of gender. This is a new crisis for women. Wives have been functionalized in the family according to men’s various needs. Another date, Mr. Liu, a policeman who later gets involved in Junjun’s incident, is with his son at the date. It is funny that his son, pretending to talk like an adult, seriously interviews Qun and her mother, checking whether Qun is qualified to be a good mother. With even grater irony the film shows that Qun’s mother answers every question cautiously, genuinely wanting to present Qun as a loving mother in front of them.

Women’s dependence, on one hand, is the influence of traditional ideas about women’s role; on the other hand, it is because of women’s inferiority in society in the new era. The connection between female subjects and the domestic sphere, though the notions were changing, were a stereotype still pervasive under the surface of the economically and socially equal status of men and women. Although there are women who want to search for their own happiness in society, yet the unequal status of men and women often leads to the result that women are trapped in the household and gradually lose themselves for the family. Furthermore, their sacrifices are not the idealized, pure, selfless motherly love that is propagated in the early 1990s popular melodramas like

Yearnings, and sometimes not even real contributions to the family, if Junjun's mother's example is taken into consideration. It reflects women's anxiety of isolation and self-restriction during social changes. Family for women, like the mothers in this film, is not a place of free will and love, but rather, something that she has to hold on to in order to live. That is the reason why when Qun comes out to her, it is hard for her to take it or even understand it:

Qun: Mom, don't you think Xiao Ling and I are happy together?

Qun's mother: But that is different from having a family!

"Real family," for her, is a heterosexual marriage and needs men to sustain and support it.

By the late 1990s, however, many problems in heterosexual marriage actually began to catch public attention. A TV drama *Hand in Hand* was a popular drama discussing many issues and conundrums confronting heterosexual marriage. It is about a divorce caused by estrangement, which, in the drama, is because the wife gives up her career and becomes a housewife. The trifles in the marriage change her and she loses herself in the marriage, which leads to an increasingly inharmonious relationship with her husband and the intervention of a mistress. When women become isolated from the outside world because of their family, they cannot hold on to anything but family. Divorce is one of the largest concerns in the heterosexual marriage crisis, and in the film, the single parents and the disharmony and the distrust of a heterosexual couple fighting on the street imply problems exist in heterosexual marriage. Moreover, heterosexual relationships in the film often embody sexual hierarchy and conflicts. The most noticeable case in the film is the domestic sexual violence in Junjun's family. Further, some scenes repeatedly happening

in daily life are also delicately inserted in the film. There is an interesting juxtaposition in a scene, in which a heterosexual couple occupies the right half of the frame, while Qun and another man occupy the left. The couple began to fight because the wife suspects that the husband cheated on her, and after a few seconds of quarrel, the wife picks up a broom and angrily chases after the husband on the street. Meanwhile, Qun and the man, like the passers-by at the foreground, watch the funny episode. An interesting reversal in heterosexual marriage appears in this scene. The conflicts caused by the repression and constraint of women within the domestic space now begin to emerge in the public sphere.

Nevertheless, many women have been dependent on their husbands and family, and they believe they should pass on the “women’s principles of life” to their daughters, which leads either to the tension in the mother-daughter relationship, or eventual compromise and self-discipline.

The mother-daughter relationship is intense and complicated in the film, and Qun’s mother exerts pressure on her about marriage from the beginning of the film. She asks Qun’s cousin to persuade her and set her up with several men, and she even accompanies Qun to the date and explains everything for her. The blind dates are like bargains between Qun’s mother and the men. She explains everything in the way that Qun will sound like a good wife and good mother who has “decent” morality, whereas her unfeminine and “abnormal” sides are not mentioned or perfectly covered, as if only in this way does Qun look worth trading. Her pressure on Qun about marriage is not coercion, but rather, it comes from motherly love and filial piety. Qun’s mother, especially as a single parent, often links Qun’s marriage with her own happiness, constantly implying to Qun that she has to get married for the family, for the mother to settle down and really be happy. The

hardship bringing Qun up also comes up in their conversation when Qun confesses that she is a lesbian: “You know it is not easy to raise you by myself, and all I hope is that you can have a family.” Qun feels deeply indebted to her mother for all these years, and thus she always eventually gives in and goes on the date even though she is not willing to. For the desire to fulfill her filial piety, Qun undergoes even larger pressure as a lesbian to balance her real life and the faked life in front of her mother. The gender hierarchy does not exert pressure on women in an explicit way, but through their own desires. Their desires are oriented by heterosexuality and patriarchy, and from mother to daughter, the norms for women are constantly reproduced.

The mother’s generation in the film represents conservative notions about women, which in fact reflects patriarchal power. Women like Qun’s mother and their cultivation play a crucial role in reinforcing patriarchal power. Patriarchal reproduction is achieved in these women’s desires, which have already been oriented in patriarchy. Inferior in the public sphere and always constrained by domestic affairs, women like Qun’s mother believe their life goal is family, and they do not have much self-awareness about their own bodies, sentiments and spirits. They see themselves as a member in the family instead of an independent individual. They thus try to be self-disciplined female subjects who fit the patriarchal family, something the rebellious lesbian daughters in the film cannot. The awakening of women’s self-consciousness brought by sexual liberation and sex in the market, increases conflicts between the generations, between the rebellious daughters who shows the strong individual consciousness and patriarchal power, which reflects in both the male’s gaze and oppression and mother’s cultivation.

While heterosexual relationships and marriage are always embroiled in the gender hierarchy in which female subjects are often cultivated in the norm of feminine and decent wife and mother who would prioritize family before the self, Ling and Qun's lesbian relationship appears to be more equal and harmonious. There is no space between them most of the time when they are together. Anthony Giddens in his study of intimate relationships and noted that an intimate relationship is exclusive, since it is built on trust and trust cannot expand infinitely. "Exclusiveness is not a guarantee of trust, but it is nevertheless an important stimulus to it. Intimacy means the disclosure of emotions and actions which the individual is unlikely to hold up to a wider public gaze."³⁸ On the one hand, the limited space for Qun and Ling indicates the restricted living space for lesbians. Yet on the other hand, the repeated scenes of intimacy in two girls' space is the attempt to highlight their "pure love" to the audience. The pure love displayed is equal, peaceful and does not involve conflicts of personal interests. They are not performing a role in the family and the society. It is a utopian space for women, where they are temporarily free from men's gaze, heterosexual marriage and the role of good wife and good mother.

In their lesbian love, Li Yu seems to present an alternative through the deviant sexuality and relationship. This might expose women to a possible new way to examine themselves and newly discover female sentiments and subjects when not interfered by men's gaze and "mother's cultivation." In this alternative sphere, deviation and "abnormality" become a chance to break out of the dominating heterosexual norms and the omnipresent influences and regulations of heteronormative institutions. Eliminating

³⁸ Anthony Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love, and Eroticism in Modern Societies*. (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1992), 138.

male gaze in this sphere, women get a chance to examine female subjects, both themselves, and other women.

Though Li Yu wants to offer some hope, the endings for the three lesbian daughters imply the predicament of these daughters' rebellion against patriarchy. Junjun's rebellion against patriarchy is the most tragic ending in the conclusion. She tries to escape from patriarchal power in a violent way, and ironically, by giving out herself to another patriarchal power – sleeping with a policeman in order to steal his pistol, which she uses to kill her father. But the rules of this society could never be fair to her, and in the end, the policemen, representing the patriarchal state power, surround her and shoot her in the confrontation. At the same moment, the camera flashes back to Qun and Ling, who finally make up with each other and are sleeping peacefully together. Juxtaposing these two scenes, maybe some comfort can be found in the lesbian couple's love after Junjun's death, or the scenes could also imply a fate with no exit for all lesbians in the end. Li also creates an open ending at the wedding of Qun's mother, as Qun does not appear to have shown up. Whether the lesbian couple will be accepted and merge successfully into Qun's mother's new marriage as well as the heteronormative world around them remains unsettled.

Coming Out and Compromise

In the film, the lesbian protagonist Qun comes out to her mother and to a man in the public space. Meanwhile, it should be emphasized that the lesbian protagonists in the film also come out to the audience. What I am interested in is how it is plotted for the lesbians

to come out and gain understanding of the audience, and in addition, how is the relation between public sphere and private sphere, intimacy and romantic love affect this process.

The inspiration of making a film about lesbians was that around the year 2000, Li Yu suddenly recognized many lesbians around her, sharing the same space with her in daily life without her acknowledging it.³⁹ In the film, Qun implies to her cousin that she is “not interested in men,” but her cousin does not get the hint since he is not likely to believe that homosexuality exists and is even among his close relatives. Also, when Qun comes out to her date, the man is shocked and cannot believe her: “People like that are very rare, right? I have never met one.” He tries to correct Qun by guiding her to admit that she is temporarily “abnormal” but would be fine after getting along with men for a while, and it takes him a long time to accept the truth. Lesbians are always hidden in the dark shadow of society and most people do not have a sense of what homosexuals are. It is not hard to see Li Yu’s effort of fitting lesbians in the films into scenes of “normal” daily life. The film is in documentary style and apart from the “astounding lesbian’s life,” all could happen in our normal daily life. Settings are most common space in our daily life, for example, streets, parks, and shops, and there are always people selling things, walking, riding bikes just as what we see everyday. Li also films lesbians’ everyday life, working, making lunch for themselves, feeding the fish, etc. After displaying their life to the audience, there is no “dark secret” about their life anymore. They are just normal people, and more importantly, they are normal people among us, only they are hidden in the shadow of the society. By displaying lesbians’ “normality,” she wants to bring the invisible lesbian community to light.

³⁹ Cui Weiping, “Li Yu fangtan: dianying—ta shi nide xin meiyu name bingleng” (Interview with Li Yu: Movies, it makes your heart less cold), <http://www.jintian.net/fangtan/cuiweiping1.html>

Research on lesbians in Shanghai in the early 21st century suggests that there is a strategy of coming out: first, LGBT have to prove to the public that they are of good quality and trustworthy at work or in daily life, only after that can they possibly convince the public that they are not “immoral” or “abnormal” in their privacy of their homosexual identity.⁴⁰ It has been shown in the film that Qun is a filial girl to her mother. She obeys her mother’s instructions to meet blind dates even though it is against her will, she takes good care of her mother, and when her mother tells her that she wants to remarry, she gives her mother full support without hesitation. She has also demonstrated her responsibility in her work. Such filial and mature conduct verifies that Qun is a morally good person, which lends credibility to her sexuality. This makes her sexual orientation, while conceding its “abnormality,” not harmful and thus tolerable.

When a lesbian comes out, she has to explain herself to a large extent using the existing “narrative,” which is the heterosexual narrative of romantic love, sexual relationship, marriage and family. When Qun comes out to her mother she tries to explain the normality of lesbian relationships to her mother: “This is just a kind of love. I need a lover just like you need a man to get married. The only difference is that my lover is a girl.” To justify herself and her lesbian relationship, to convince her mother that their relationship is normal, Qun has to use the heterosexual relationship to make her mother understand. Qun finally gains her mother’s understanding, yet this compromise is still made with the intercession of a man and under the influence of patriarchal authority. Qun’s mother decides to accept her daughter’s sexual identity as a lesbian because of Mr. Zhang’s persuasion. Because of Mr. Zhang’s son’s understanding, Mr. Zhang is able to

⁴⁰ Ding Naifei, *Zhiyi hunyin jiating lianxuti*, 置疑婚姻家庭連續體 (Querying marriage-family continuum) (2011), 171.

establish a new family with Qun's mother. Qun's mother will be involved in a new patriarchal family structure, and it is because of Mr. Zhang's words that Qun's mother thinks it through and decides to make up with Qun.

Conclusion

In *East Palace, West Palace*, A Lan is the most rebellious role against mainstream sexual morality in the 1990s. A Lan's appearance and sexual activities with other gay men in a public space are stigmatized as filthy, masochistic, and abnormal in sexual morality and thus denounced as "disturbing" the social order. Sexual ethics is here connected to "socialist political and public order" and stigmas in the category of sexual morality become strong metaphors used to exclude "deviant subjects" and discipline individuals in the society. LGBT are stigmatized morally as the demons and tumors of society, which should be "removed" in order not to threaten or contaminate "normal" society. They are not qualified citizens with *suzhi*, and they are not members of families with "traditional virtues." They are not "standard citizens" wanted by the state and the society. They are marginalized "aliens" and can possibly impede the formation of "healthy" new citizens. Their living space, as in *East Palace, West Palace*, is violently oppressed. A Lan is one of them, and so are independent film directors like Zhang Yuan.

The threat of state violence, which is symbolized by the policemen in the film, are still pervasive in the society, especially in public space. As in *East Palace, West Palace*, the policemen, under the name of regulating public conducts and morality, violently arrest gay men in the park. Zhang Yuan and Wang Xiaobo change the relationship between the "subject" and the "other," using the sadomasochistic relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed. The powerful oppressor falls into the clutches of the oppressed as the confusion of his identification and sexuality. This tricky battle throughout the night acts out Foucauldian power relations. Heterosexual ethics creates the

hierarchy based on heteronormativity. The clash with heteronormativity causes unstable subjectivity and uncertain legitimacy of power which Xiaoshi embodies. And if A Lan, the illegal subject, is denigrated as “jian” in heterosexual ethics, he reverses his identity as the “other” and the “alien” in heteronormativity because of his masochism.

East Palace, West Palace exposes how sexual morality becomes the way of alienating the “other” in the operation of power. In contrast, the character A Lan, suffering all stigmas and even making the shameful feeling part of the sexual pleasure, overturns the heteronormative logic and operation of power which were supposed to work. As an “accident” in the system, he challenges and questions the legitimacy of heteronormativity.

Compared to *East Palace, West Palace*, *Fish and Elephant* is less radical in queer politics, but focuses more on female subjectivity and the patriarchal power. In *Fish and Elephant*, sexual morality is discussed in the framework of family and marriage. The living conditions and sentiments of lesbians in the film, from another angle, expose the constraints on and discipline of female subjects. Though in the reform era sexual ethics changed considerably compared to periods before, yet unfortunately, women in this era are trapped in a new cage. On one hand, they publicly become objects of men’s desires. Though the society and the state ideology all advocate equality between men and women, yet under this ideological surface is the unequal social, cultural and economic status for women, which render them under men’s threat and discipline. On the other hand, women are once again bound with domestic obligations and are expected to be “good wives and mothers,” which leads to their strong dependence upon the family and the danger of losing their self-consciousness. Their knowledge about female subjects is based on

heterosexual marriage and family which involves unequal gender hierarchy, yet such knowledge forms their notions and norms of sexual morality, which they would pass on to their daughters through their motherly cultivation and admonition, reproducing new female subjects subordinated to the unequal circumstances.

Though the state and the mainstream society advocate equality for women, equality in marriage and harmonious family, yet as a matter of fact, the inequality between men and women is rooted in social structure and economic inequality. The advocacy of harmonious family is not based on equality, but on “traditional virtues and values” which are based on the sacrifice of women like Liu Huifang. Moreover, often women also conspire in the reproduction of patriarchal power. Queers in the film want to break the rules and refuse to subordinate themselves to patriarchal power. They are “freaks” who refuse to marry men and join the performance of a good wife and a kind mother in a heterosexual family. Yet their intimate relationship excluding male gaze offers a new perspective to examine female subjects. When the independent lesbian daughters, free of being demonized, are juxtaposed with their dependent mothers, the irrationality of contemporary dominant sexual morality shows.

Both films challenge heteronormativity and disclose its oppressive logic. Through the discourse of heteronormative sexual ethics, people are categorized into “heteronormativity” and “homo-abnormality.” The accusation of sexual morality is easy but effective in regulating individuals by arousing feelings of shame. Stigmas of sexual morality are repeatedly used by heterosexuality (also state and patriarchy) to strengthen the hierarchy through excluding the “others” and reassuring the boundaries between “normal” and “abnormal.”

LGBT are accused of being a tumor of society. The demonization of LGBT goes along with desires to become new cosmopolitan citizens. Ascribing problems to personal morality and quality distract attention from the anxiety and important social problems in the social transformation. Jeffery Weeks observes that “The moral panic crystallizes widespread fears and anxieties, and often deals with them not by seeking the real causes of the problems and conditions which they demonstrate but by displacing them on to ‘Folk Devils’ in an identified social group (often the ‘immoral’ or ‘degenerate’). Sexuality has had a peculiar centrality in such panics, and sexual ‘deviants’ have been omnipresent scapegoats.”⁴¹

⁴¹ Jeffrey Weeks, *Sex, Politics and Society: The Regulation of Sexuality since 1800* (New York: Longman, 1981), 14.

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